Operationalizing the Measurement of Style in Language Variation

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Determining adequate descriptive and explanatory accounts of "style" and "style shift" have been relatively elusive goals in the study of language variation despite the fact that it is well documented that individuals increase or decrease certain features of their speech under different conditions. The motivation for these shifts and the explanation of this behavior have been strongly debated, and competing explanations have been offered, including the "Attention to Speech" model (Labov 1972), the "Audience Design" model (Bell 1984), and the "Speaker Design" approaches (e.g., Eckert 2000, Schilling-Estes 1998). While these theories all provide insight into speakers' use of style, the limitations of each have been widely discussed as well, and no unitary characterization of style currently exists.

The difficulties inherent in understanding style are compounded by the scarcity of reliable quantitative methods that have been applied to assess style. Most studies of style have come from individual case studies and sociolinguistic interviews, which provide useful information but lack experimental controls and often do not qualify for the application of inferential statistical procedures. More recently, quantitative analyses that seek to capture overall changes in style have emerged in the literature, with particular focus on African American English (AAE). Measures like the Craig and Washington (2006) Dialect Density Measure work to calculate dialect use by analyzing dozens of linguistic features, but they are also accompanied by numerous restrictions that limit their practical application. Ongoing debate about which features best characterize AAE call into question the notion that any measure can be "all-inclusive" or effectively predictive. Additionally, the use of a large set of features, some of which have limited tokens, severely restricts the types of statistical analyses that can be applied to a given data set.

To address the issues that accompany the application of current quantitative methods to the examination of style, this paper suggests that selected feature subsets may be used to quantify variation in two controlled situations. We use a sample of 50 sixth-grade students who are examined under conditions that involve controlled differences in formality during a peer interaction as the basis for comparison. Two expansive sets of more than 30 variables (Craig and Washington 2006; Renn 2007) constituting dialect density measures were then compared with a subset of 6 variables to determine the strength of the relationship of the subset of structures with the larger composite indices. The analysis indicates that the composite indices used in the comparison were highly correlated with the selected subset of features, thus indicating that a subset can be used to reliably represent shifting styles. Importantly, the flexibility of this type of measure makes it compatible with both existing and future approaches to stylistic variation, presenting an opportunity for more consistent measurement of stylistic variation. Thus, despite lingering questions regarding style and variation, the proposed technique shows that style can be effectively operationalized in the study of language variation.

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